

‘Innovation’ as a heresiological argument and a theological topic in Akindynos’
Refutatio of Palamas’ Epistula III

1. Innovation: An old problem within Christianity

Since early times, opponents in disputes involving Christianity have often accused each other of spreading new teachings. This applies to inner-Christian polemics as well as to disputes between Christians and others. With regard to paganism, the Athenagoras of Athens, in the 2nd century, was the only Christian apologist who tried to appeal to the novelty of Christianity in the history of religion as an argument in favour of Christianity.¹ All others emphasized the loyalty of Christians to ancient Roman traditions and to “classical” values and convictions. Looking at inner-christian controversies, a revealing example is that, in Paul’s letters to Timotheus, some copyists changed κenoφωνία (id est vain speech) into καινοφωνία (new speech).² Both terms were apparently seen as synonymous.

However, the roots of such a pejorative approach to novelty, or innovation, go back even farther than Christianity. Already in classical antiquity, the old was considered superior (πρεσβύτερον κρείττον)³. It is therefore not surprising that the accusation of invalid innovation is also found in the controversy between Akindynos and Palamas. Unusual, however, is the intensity, both quantitative and qualitative, with which Akindynos approaches this topic in his Refutationes against Palamas.

Starting from this observation, the question I would like to address in my paper is the following: Does Akindynos merely use the concept of innovation as a rhetorical device to combat theological reasoning that he opposes – or does he rather treat innovation *itself* as a theologically loaded problem, and if so: for what reason?

To answer this I will examine first terms and phrases and then rhetorical and argumentative strategies by which Akindynos rejects innovation. As far as I am aware, this is the first attempt to study this aspect in Akindynos’s works. Therefore, my objective in this paper is a modest one: I limit myself to the Refutatio of Epistula 3, which we have examined in our research project, and based on this source I endeavor to create a typology, which could then be extended to the entire work of Akindynos.

2. Terms

In the Refutatio, derivatives from the Greek root καιν- appear 27 times. Twice Akindynos addresses Palamas as "the new theologian" (ὁ καινὸς θεολόγος). First in Refutatio 2, Akindynos juxtaposes statements of Palamas on divine energies with references from the Cappadocians Basileios and Gregory of Nazianzen on the perfection of God. From this context, it is already clear that ὁ καινὸς θεολόγος is in no way a positive or neutral term, but rather points to the accusation of apostasy from the doctrine of the fathers.

In Refutatio 10 Palamas is again called "the new theologian", this time in a polemical exclamation: "And how could I keep this legacy for you, you new theologian (ὦ καινὲ θεολόγε), since it is not from the fathers – what nonsense! – but from the father of lies and heresies?" Here the accusation is made explicit through word play which traces the teachings of Palamas to the "father of heresies" (meaning the devil) instead of the orthodox Church fathers.

Nouns that Akindynos uses to describe innovation are, on the one hand, καινοφρωνία which appears four times⁴ and καινοτομία, or rather the verb καινοτομέω, each of which appears only once.

In my impression Akindynos uses καινὸς θεολόγος and καινοφρωνία / καινοτομία retorts to κενόφρωνος, by which Palamas tries to brand him in the letter version that Akindynos copied and to which the Refutatio refers (Epist. III Nadal 2,8,13). Thus, the play with the words καινός (new) and κένος (vain) we find in the text-critical variants of Paul's Letters to Timothy continues with Akindynos and Palamas. And I tend to believe that this is not a coincidence.

3. Rhetorical strategies

More revealing than the simple analysis of terms and their semantics is an investigation of the rhetorical and argumentative strategies within which Akindynos utilizes this linguistic material. Following the patterns of discourse established in Byzantium in theological disputes, he cites a large number of fathers to prove his positions and to fight any innovation: "Because we love them" Akindynos claims in Refutatio 8, "because we love them as a completely intact and secure throne of orthodoxy, we will not in any way permit these unholy new utterances of yours..."

The table shows an overview of the persons whom Akindynos claimed to be "an intact and secure throne of orthodoxy"

Ref.	
2	Basilios, Gregory of Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa
3	Maximos Homologetes
4	Dionys Areopagites; John Damascenus, Gregory of Nyssa
5	Dionys Areopoagites , Maximos, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Athanasius «or rather Christus himself, Isaac the Syrian, Paul, Isaiah, Gregory Nazianzen, Maximos Homologetes
6	Basilios , Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, Dionys Areopagite
7	Maximos Homologetes, Epiphanos of Salamis, Athanasios of Alexandria, Maximos Homologetes, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, Isaac the Syrian, Athanasios of Alexandria, Basilios, Dionysios, Athanasios of Alexandria
8	Gregory of Nazianzen, Basilios, Cyril of Alexandrien, Sophronios of Jerusalem
9	Epiphanius of Salamiis, John Damascene, Dionys Areopagite, Sophronios of Jerusalem, Athanasios of Alexandria
10	Maximos Homologetes, Dionys of Alexandria
13	Isaac the Syrian
14	Athanasios of Alexandrien, Epiphanius of Salamis

(Table: patristic referees in the Refutatio).

If we compare this to the patristic references in Palamas' Epistula III, it becomes clear that Akindynos relies on the fathers to a much greater extent. Furthermore, he stages the references to the orthodox fathers very skillfully.

3.1. Staging a debate with the fathers

The rhetorical finesse lies in the fact that Akindynos does not only refer to the fathers as authorities of the past. Rather, he stages a direct dialogue between Palamas and the late ancient theologians which is of course anachronistic but aims for a greater impact. This is most evident in Refutatio 2 where he interrupts a quotation from Gregor of Nyssa's Oratio Catechetica with the following insertion:

ὧ φησιν ὁ θεολόγος ἔτι καὶ ὁ θεσπέσιος Γρηγόριος ὁ Νυσσαέων ἐν τῷ κατηχητικῷ πρὸς τοὺς Ἕλληνας οὐ μᾶλλον μὲν οὖν πρὸς ἐκείνους ἢ σὲ καὶ τὸν σὸν πρὸς ἐκείνους ἐν τοῖς δόγμασι ζῆλον, κοινὴν δὲ ποιούμενος πρὸς Ἕλληνας τὴν διάλεξιν οὕτως ἡμᾶς αὐτὴν ποιεῖσθαι πρὸς ἐκείνους καὶ πρὸς ὑμᾶς νῦν διδάσκει·

This is what the theologian, namely the divine Gregorian of Nyssa, talks about in the Catechetical Oration to the Hellenes, *now less to those than to you*, namely with regard to

your zeal against those in your teachings. So he makes the discussion with the Hellenes a common one, and so he teaches us *now* to lead them with those and with you.

According to Akindynos, Gregory of Nyssa and all the other church fathers do not only speak to their own, 4th century contemporaries, but they directly address Palamas: "Ἀκουσον τοῦ Θεοσπεσίου Μαξίμου / "Listen to the holy Maximos" he calls upon Palamas, and after having cited Maximos, he asks as how to make sure: ἀκούεις; "Do you hear?" (Refutatio 3). At another point, Isaac the Syrian is called upon to bring Palamas to his senses:

"But the divine Isaac, of whom you have the highest opinion because of his theoretical considerations - but we, you say, have nothing in common with him because of the lowliness of our thinking and the tastelessness of our view directed against you - he shall now educate you and bring you rabid man to reason!" (Refutatio 7)

Ἀλλ' ὁ Θεοσπέσιος Ἰσαάκ, ὃ μάλιστα σὺ φρονεῖς διὰ τὸ θεωρητικόν· ἡμῖν δὲ οὐ μετεῖναι λέγεις αὐτοῦ διὰ τὸ χθαμαλὸν ἡμῶν τῆς διανοίας καὶ ἄγευστον τῆς κατὰ σε θεωρίας, ἀλλ' οὗτος οὖν παιδευέτω σε καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ σῶφρον μεμηνότα ἐπαναγέτω.

This 'making simultaneous' the discourses of the 4th and 14th centuries goes beyond the traditional use of the Church fathers by Byzantine theologians. Akindynos does not only refer to the authorities of antiquity, but rather elevates the ancient disputes to typological and supertemporal ones. Arguments and decisions thus become applicable to his own time, and he can summon them against Palamas.

It is, however, remarkable that Akindynos explicitly refuses to play the fathers off against each other. In Refutatio 6, after having quoted Saint Basil, he asks rhetorically:

"What is the need to counter these statements on an established doctrine of another Holy Father, as if it were holy and imperative to strive and do almost anything to refute one statement of the Holy Fathers by another, in order to introduce something completely new and to overthrow the faith handed down to us from time immemorial and to transform everything into our understanding?"

Ref. 6: ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ τοῦτο ἦν ὅσιον καὶ ἀναγκαῖον σπουδάζειν καὶ πάντα ἐπεικῶς πραγματεύεσθαι, ὅπως δι' ἑτέρου ἕτερον ἀνασκευάζωμεν τῶν ἱερῶν πατέρων, ἵνα τι πάντως καινοτομήσωμεν καὶ τὴν πάλαι κειμένην ἡμῖν ἀνατρέψωμεν πίστιν καὶ πάντα πρὸς τὴν ἡμετέραν αὐτῶν διάνοιαν ἅπαξ σφαλεῖσαν μετασκευάσωμεν;

The need to assert absolute unity among the Church Fathers arises from the fact that Palamas himself, of course, quotes them to a great extent in order to support his teachings on divine energies. In order to overcome Palamas, Akindynos must therefore present the Church Fathers as a unified group that appears clear and unambiguous. Otherwise they would not be able to resolve the current ongoing conflict.

But in order to be able to refer to them as a unified group, Akindynos must demonstrate that Palamas misquotes the Church Fathers. He does this by accusing Palamas of falsification both by addition and by omission.

3.2. The charge of falsification

a) Falsification by addition

This applies in particular to the formulation which in Epistula III is declared the main controversial issue in the whole document. I am speaking of the addition of φύσει to the quotation of Pseudo-Dionys Areopagita which Akindynos discusses in Refutatio 9. Indeed, in the version of Palamas' Epistula III used by Akindynos, Palamas himself defends this addition: «So how could anyone agree, even if no word is lost about the divine energies, that the Uncreated is One, without adding 'by nature'?» (Epist. 9). It is not my task here to discuss how credible this version of the letter actually is. As you probably know, there is an intensive discussion about this, especially with Nadal, who accused Palamas of having revised his own letter and rid it of problematic formulations.⁵ What matters to me here is how emphatically Akindynos highlights this addition (in Refutatio 9 and 14). The main point of disagreement is whether there can be something that is uncreated not by nature, but by grace, meaning that created things can *become* uncreated. This is what Palamas teaches with regard to human beings – namely Melchisedek and Paul but potentially also the hesychast monks – that they, although created, became or can become uncreated natures by participation in the divine energies. Akindynos accuses Palamas of introducing such thinking and attributing it to Dionysios – as well as to Athanasius and Epiphanius in Refutatio 14 – with the addition of

φύσει ("by nature"). Because this addition makes it possible to assume that there is, or at least can be, another deity that is uncreated "not by nature, but by grace". The consequence would be, according to Akindynos, that there are created divine energies through which man can participate in the uncreated being of God. And this he denounces as a relapse into Greek polytheism and at the same time as a logical impossibility, since something originally created cannot be uncreated. Therefore, he repeats "uncreated by nature" (φύσει ἄκτιστος) in a penetrating way to illustrate rhetorically the absurdity of this thought.

It is, as I said, not a question of whether he is reproducing the teachings of Palamas at all correctly. But the charge of falsification by addition is an important means in his polemical rhetoric.

b) Falsification by omission

The second form of falsification is, in contrast, that by omission. Two times Akindynos accuses Palamas of doing so. The first instance concerns the letter from Dionysius Areopagita to Gaius. Interestingly, Akindynos himself admits that Dionysios by δῶρον θεοποιόν uses a new expression not yet established in ecclesiastical teaching of that time. But Akindynos calls it "a small one" (μικρά καινοφωνία) and immediately points out that through the following explanation this expression is fully reconciled with the traditional Orthodox teaching. Palamas therefore is accused of disregarding these explanations:

"but that you, though you know this and act blatantly maliciously, cut up the letter of divine Dionysius and silently passed over the test of his small novel expression, is obvious. For what purpose? The letter is easily comprehensible to the end and says as follows (... quotation...) Why then did you silently ignore the greater part and most of all the conclusion of the letter?"

σύ δὲ εἰδὼς τοῦτο καὶ κακουργῶν προφανῶς διέκοψας τὴν ἐπιστολὴν τοῦ θείου Διονυσίου καὶ τὸν ἔλεγχον τῆς αὐτοῦ μικρᾶς καινοφωνίας παρεσιώπησας δῆλον· ... τὰ πλείω καὶ μάλιστα τὸ τέλος παρεσιώπησας; (Ref.5).

Even in the second case, Akindynos accuses Palamas of deliberately omitting certain statements in Maximos Homologetes/Confessor in order to introduce his new teachings:

«And what was said about Melchizedek by the divine Maximos, who, according to the divine apostle, had become like the Son of God (...), you did not adopt, because you had been longing, it seems, for new expressions!»

Καὶ ὅ, τι πού περὶ τοῦ Μελχισεδέκ τῷ θείῳ Μαξίμῳ παρέφθεκται, ὅς ἦν φωμοιωμένος τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ (...) τοῦτο οὐ παραλαβὼν, ἅτε πάλαι κεχηνῶς, ὡς ἔοικεν, εἰς τὰς καινοφωνίας,

Palamas thus appears as someone who arbitrarily edits the orthodox authorities of the past. Again, it is not at issue here that Palamas makes exactly the same accusation against Akindynos, and neither of both is right in doing so. My interest is confined to the rhetorical strategies that are employed to combat novelty. In this respect, one more observation is notable.

3.3. Renewing old heresies

Akindynos claims on the one hand that Palamas "wants to plant a new doctrine in the middle of the church". But on the other hand, in the next breath, he calls exactly this "new doctrine" a well-known heresy:

“...after the most godless heresy against the plan of salvation of the Incarnate Word of God, our Redeemer, had once been set in motion, it was again renewed and strengthened more and more. What was this heresy originally made of? And what kind was it? From time immemorial some believed that the human nature of Christ had become uncreated because of the union with God as Logos, by whom it was added and united to a hypostasis. It (scil. this heresy) met with accusations from our fathers divine from time immemorial and the punishments appropriate for godlessness...”

οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς ποτὲ κινηθείσης κατὰ τῆς ἐνσάρκου τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν οἰκονομίας ἀσεβεστάτης αἰρέσεως πάλιν ἀνακλητικὸν καὶ μᾶλλον συστατικόν. Ἡ ἀφ’ ὧν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἀπετέχθη· τίς δὲ ἦν αὕτη; ἄκτιστον τοῦ Χριστοῦ τὸ νθρώπινον πάλαι τινὲς ᾤκησαν γεγονέναι τῇ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν λόγον ἐνώσει, ᾧ προσελήφθη καὶ ἡνωταὶ εἰς μίαν

ὑπόστασιν· ἢ τοῖς πάλαι θείοις ἡμῶν πατράσιν εὐθύνας ἔδωκε καὶ δίκας ἐπ’ ἐκείναις ἀσεβείᾳ
πρεπούσας καὶ τοῦνομα τῶν ταύτην τὴν αἵρεσιν γεγεννηκότων τῷ ριθμῷ τῶν αἱρέσεων ἀπ’
αὐτοῦ τοῦ πράγματος ἀκτιστῆται γὰρ καὶ μονοφυσίται ἀναπεφώνηται·

What at first seems to be a paradox turns out to be a rhetorical feat: the allegedly new doctrine is not new at all, but only a renewed version of a long known heresy. This has two implications. First, the teacher of the new doctrine, in our case Palamas, appears uneducated because he doesn’t realise that his teachings have been refused by the Church long before. Second, it legitimizes the referral to the fathers. For if the teaching were really new, one would also have to fight it in a new way and with new arguments. But if one can show that it has basically long been known, it is sufficient to use the ancient fathers as counterevidence. Hence, the novelty of Palamas’ teaching is revealed to be merely alleged novelty. Thus the concept of the “new” is finally robbed of everything positive. The opponent is not even innovative (which could still make the new interesting and worthy to deal with). In the depiction of Akindynos, however, Palamas only *appears* to be innovative. If the refutation succeeds in unmasking this as false, as Akindynos apparently hopes, the allegedly new doctrine loses all attraction.

4. The „new“ as a theological problem

Coming to the theological aspects, it seems to me important that Akindynos relates the invention of a new deity to the conception of the biblical motive of the new creation. According to Akindynos, Palamas’ teaching on divine energies leads in its final consequence to the invention of a new type of deity:

“the new and subordinate deity, which is participable and effectual, and is not material and as such spiritually visible with bodily eyes, which, as you assert, shares the nature and nature of the power and energy of God.” (Das Wort "participable" gibt es so im normalen Gebrauch nicht, aber du benutzt es vermutlich bewusst.)

Ref. 7: ἢ τὴν καινὴν καὶ ὑφειμένην θεότητα, τὴν μεθεκτὴν καὶ ἐνεργουμένην καὶ ἀνούσιον καὶ ὁρατὴν καθ’ αὐτὴν πνευματικῶς σωματικοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς τὴν, ὡς λέγεις, φυσικὴν καὶ οὐσιώδη τοῦ θεοῦ δύναμιν καὶ ἐνέργειαν.⁶

Why does the invention of this deity seem so dangerous to Akindynos that he again and again raises it anew to polemicize against it? In my view, this is not only because Akindynos aims to present himself as a consequent monotheist. Rather, the reasons are above all soteriological - and this takes us to the theological core problem of the Hesychast dispute.

The fact that Palamas conceives divine energy as created but at the same time as capable of making human beings uncreated through participation in God's οὐσία, has, according to Akindynos, consequences for the perception of man's salvation. This becomes very clear in Refutatio 6 and 7, where Akindynos discusses in detail the biblical and patristic notion of man's new creation and contrasts it with Palamas' teachings. The key term Akindynos is defending in this respect, is ἀνακαινίζω, re-new, which he contrasts with the notion of a new creation. For Akindynos, the new man of whom Paul speaks in his second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5:17 can only be a renewal of the old and thus remains bound to created nature. All verses in the Bible and the Fathers which speak of a new creation, according to him, mean a renewal of the old, not a new creation *instead* of the old.

This is also relevant with regard to anthropology: Man is not able to overcome his human nature. Anything else would result in man being made God - which is the worst error of the polytheists. To what extent these considerations also have a social dimension would be worth considering. Akindynos, who claims to be a hesychast himself, in any case turns against a certain elitism of the monks and denounces it as Pelagianism. With biting mockery, he says that Palamas himself probably first and foremost wants to be worshipped as divine. And at the end of his Refutatio (14) he warns against a devaluation of all creation through talk of uncreated, visible divine energies. With regard to theology, his concern is also to preserve the dignity of all created things and of all men equally.

5. Conclusion

Everyone who aimed to participate in theological debates in 14th century Byzantium had to prove his or her agreement with the Church Fathers.⁷ One could say that loyalty to the tradition belongs to the space of discourse⁸ in which Akindynos and Palamas move together. Therefore, Akindynos could accuse not only Palamas of novelty, but also his opponent Barlaam.⁹ In the middle of the Refutatio, Akindynos justifies his adherence to the tried and tested with a quotation from the First Letter to John (2:25): "if what you have heard from the

beginning remains in you, then you remain in the Son and in the Father". This seems to be his motto and his agenda. Is Akindynos therefore simply a staunch conservative who, out of principle, resists any kind of innovation? It is my impression that Akindynos' conservatism has deeper roots and reasons.

In his *Refutatio*, novelty or innovation appear to be a problem for ecclesiological, theological and anthropological-soteriological reasons. He considers any type of innovation or novelty dangerous, not only with regard to theological orthodoxy but also for the unity of the church and the cohesion within a Christian society.

With regard to the rhetorical strategies and modes of argumentation, it is exciting to see how Akindynos' absolute innovation and renewal of the known and the existing relate to one another: in order to prove heresy to Palamas, he relies on the argumentative pattern that the allegedly new doctrine is an already well-known and overcome heresy. And in interpreting the new creation of men, he emphasizes continuity with the old. With allusion to the biblical preacher one could say: For Akindynos there is nothing new under the sun - and there should be nothing new, either. He proves to be a profoundly conservative thinker.

With historical hindsight I consider Palamas indeed to be the more innovative thinker of both. Also Palamas linked the piety of the Hesychasts to theological tradition, but in contrast to Akindynos he continued to develop patristic and monastic theology. Of course he referred to ancient authorities of the Church as well, but in a creative and innovative way. Therefore, in a way Akindynos is analytically right when he portrays Palamas as a novel thinker. My impression is that it was only in the neo-palamism of the 20th century that Palamas was declared a conservative who in no way deviated from the doctrine of the fathers. From the standpoint that Orthodoxy shows itself exclusively in total agreement with the Church Fathers, the innovative aspects of his thinking could not be emphasized. In this way, the power of Palamitic theology was not entirely recognized. One wanted and had to misjudge it because innovation as such has been rated negatively in the Orthodox world - and is still today. In this respect, the Western theological tradition, which had cultivated a more positive understanding of progress and innovation since the Enlightenment, could have found an appreciation of Palamas' theology. But the ecumenical condemnations of that time were apparently already so entrenched that Western scholars (like Nadal) adhered as uncritically to

Akindynos as Eastern scholars (like Meyendorff and Chrestou) did with Palamas. And at this point, it seems, we still stand today.

References

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² See 1 Tim 6,20 and 2 Tim 2,16. Cf. It's not absolutely clear whether it is a conscious play on words or simply an itazism

³ Cf. references

⁴ Stellen aufzählen: Refutatio 6:

⁵ Reference Nadal

⁶ See also Ref. 14: ἵνα σὺ τὸ καινότατον μίαν μὲν φύσει ἄκτιστον, ἑτέρας δὲ κτίστους οὐ φύσει δογματίσης θεότηας·

⁷ References / secondary literature

⁸ References to Diskursraum

⁹ Refutatio 13: "It is precisely for the sake of these statements that we have contradicted Barlaam for the sake of holy and safe peace and for the sake of things for which he seemed to use whatever new expressions and to artificially conceive of something going beyond it and slander the rest."